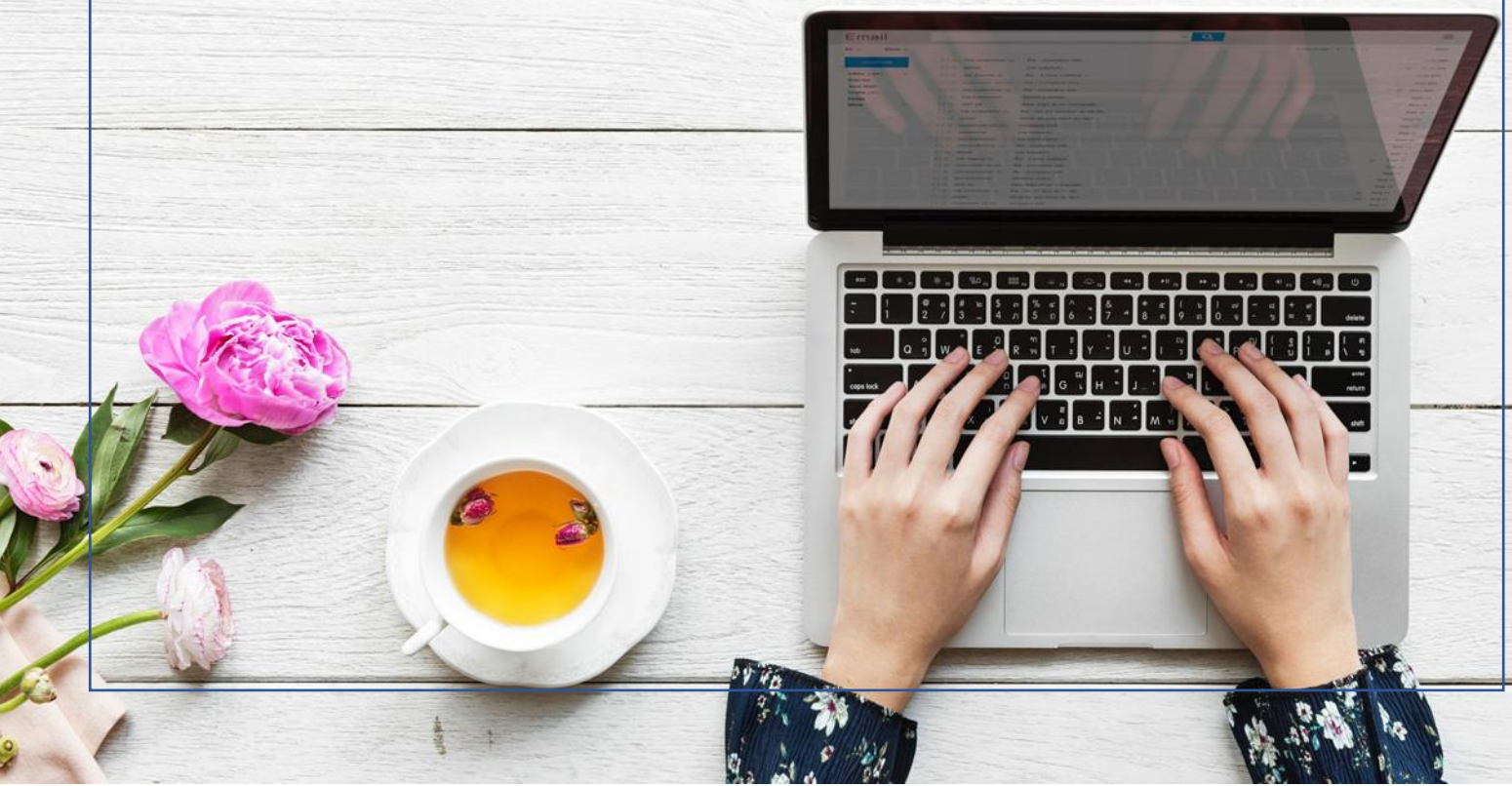


Top Ten Book Proposal Mistakes

By Helen Lee





INTRODUCTION

“Of making many books there is no end,” we read in the book of Ecclesiastes, but that does not stop countless people all around the world from trying. Every year, estimates range from 500,000 to more than a million titles are published each year, and that does not include the many more books that are self-published. No disrespect to anyone who self-publishes; there are valid reasons to choose that path and several benefits that accompanying the self-publishing journey. (As someone who has helped her dad self-publish his memoir, I know exactly what those advantages are! But that is a subject for another day.) But most aspiring authors who have a dream to write a book are driven by an internal fire, an insatiable drive to see their words in print, preferably under the banner of a reputable publisher who can bring credibility, support, and (hopefully) marketing magic that will turn all those hard-wrought words into a lasting cultural contribution that will make a difference in people’s lives.

As a publishing professional who has reviewed and discussed hundreds of proposals from hopeful authors-to-be, I have seen the full range of submissions, from the most rudimentary outlines to the snazziest of productions. And I have seen what works and what doesn’t. Here is a list of the top ten mistakes people make when they submit book proposals for consideration to a traditional publisher:

1. Emphasizing Style Over Substance

I have seen the most gorgeous book proposals come into my mailbox. But some of them have been so image-heavy and massive that they take forever to print and are difficult to share with colleagues. Others are beautifully designed, but the content is thin and underdeveloped. I will take a plain, undesigned proposal with thoughtful content and strong writing any day over a proposal with a WOW design factor. Take the time to present your proposal well, but the marginal value of overspending time on eye-popping design is limited.

2. Clarifying the Felt Need

On one hand, “there is nothing new under the sun.” On the other hand, only you can write the book that you have been called to write. But it may not be enough to write about a topic that just interests you. You must be able to envision whether there is a felt need for your book, based on your observations of what is happening in the culture, church, and world. Don’t assume that just because it’s important to you, that is a sufficient understanding of whether your book is needed or not. Both must be true for you to successfully pitch a book that gets accepted.

3. Playing the Numbers Game

Some prospective writers, in trying to ensure that they will capture the attention of at least one publisher, send their proposal indiscriminately to as many publishers as possible. But in so doing, they demonstrate that they do not know much about the publisher and haven’t done their homework about whether their proposed book fits the publisher’s line. More is not better when it comes to pitching your proposal to multiple publishers. Take the time to find the right ones for your book idea.

4. Exaggerating Your Numbers

Never, ever, ever exaggerate your social media numbers. Publishing professionals always check. Editors, marketers, publicists, everyone. Multiple people will be looking for you online to see if what you say in your proposal is reflected in your online reality. And never use bots and other services that artificially bump up your followers. That is also easy to detect if we look at the engagement your posts generate. Honesty and authenticity is always the best policy here.

5. Being Invisible Online

Exaggerating numbers is an unforgiveable sin, but if you are not able to be found online at all, that is also a problem. You must have a web presence of some kind, whether your own site or through an organization or employer. And as much as many prospective authors wish it were not so, social media presence in a major public platform (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, TikTok, etc.), or preferably more than one, is desirable.

6. Overstating Your Expertise

The very first proposal I ever read as an editor was from someone who declared himself the world expert in a certain academic field. He had just gotten his doctorate and by all estimations he was perhaps in his early 30s. I could not take him seriously as an author after reading this declaration. You can write about your expertise without crossing the line into unnecessary bragging.

7. Forgetting to Do Your Market Research

The competitive analysis is a key part of your proposal. Don’t ignore it. Publishing professionals will do their own due diligence, and when they do, they will want to see that what they come up with matches

what you have put in your proposal. Show that you have done your homework and discovered what the most likely competitive titles to your own book will be.

8. Failing to Submit a Sample

When I am reading a proposal from a first-time author, I get frustrated when I do not see a sample chapter included from the book they are proposing. Established authors can get away with this; not first timers. I don't want to see samples of blog posts or articles; I want to see the way in which the author will be working out the content he or she is proposing.

9. Ignoring Your Network

Prospective authors want to write. They may not want to pay any attention to developing connections and relationships that might help them with the promotional side of publishing because they are busy trying to write. But the reality is that publishers will also want to see some evidence that those promotional connections do exist and will be able to help support the book's release. You cannot focus so much on developing your book idea to the exclusion of concurrently developing your professional network.

10. Letting Self-Doubt Get the Best of You

Lastly, I have met so many prospective authors who do have a wonderful idea for a book, but they are plagued with insecurities about their platform, their social media numbers, and whether they have anything to offer in the form of a book. If the content and the writing is strong, there is absolutely hope that you can get published. Do not be your worst enemy in this process and prevent yourself from making forward progress.

If you'd like to learn more about what it takes to get published, consider taking my course for more information on these secrets and much more!

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